

Subject: Vote NO on Article 38: the Elimination of Single-Family Zoning

Dear Fellow Town Meeting Member,

I am writing in advance of our taking up [Article 38](#) in the hopes that I can encourage you to vote against it. In short, Article 38 would eliminate all single-family zoning in Arlington. Supporters of Article 38 have made a number of well-meant arguments to justify this change saying Article 38 would offer home-buyers more choice, would put downward pressure on housing prices, would help the environment, and would eliminate a racist legacy of exclusionary zoning. I'll take each point in order.

Article 38 would offer home-buyers more choice

I take this to mean that after a single-family house is demolished, the developer could choose to replace it with either an expensive single-family home or two less expensive condos. The goal, as I understand it, is to slow down the building of those ugly single-family McMansions now going up across Town and give buyers a chance to buy starter homes. The problem is, as we can see, that developers are already choosing exclusively to replace single-family homes in the R2 districts with duplex condos and Article 38 would simply expand the range of homes vulnerable to teardown. When we eliminate single-family homes, we almost guarantee that they will be replaced with condos or townhouses as ostentatious as single-family McMansions. If we actually want to curb the building of McMansions, we should enact legislation that addresses that problem directly, and not fiddle with our single-family zoning.

Article 38 would put downward pressure on housing prices

This argument seems logical but it doesn't stand up to the facts on the ground. When you examine real estate records over the past 20 years in Arlington you see that every single single-family house that has been demolished in R2 has been replaced with condo duplexes. As for affordability, new single-family homes are now selling for close to \$2M and new condos for \$1M or more. Affordability, then, is relative and is germane only for the well-heeled. Despite our almost religious belief in the "law" of supply and demand, real estate prices in Arlington continue to rise despite the creation of more living units. As [this study](#) points out:

“...housing markets are not like standard markets, so that aggregate increases in supply do not translate in any straightforward way to decreases in price, because the internal plumbing of housing markets – succession, migration, and occupation patterns – are full of frictions, sunk costs, barriers and externalities that make the effects of aggregate supply increases highly uneven, and in many cases involve unintended or contradictory effects.”

Article 38 would help the environment

Supporters say accurately that new construction offers modern systems that use less energy and produce less greenhouse gasses. What is overlooked is that duplexes built over the past 20 years to replace single-family homes in Arlington have required more asphalt for driveways, tree clearing for expanded structural footprints, the use of new building materials with huge lifetime carbon impacts, and the waste of already sequestered carbon in the landfill-destined older structure. [Data and research](#) show that preserving older structures is much more environmentally sound than teardowns and replacements.

Article 38 would eliminate a racist legacy of exclusionary zoning

Exclusionary zoning has, indeed, been used across the country to effectively prevent historically marginalized people from moving into such cities and towns. Eliminating it here in Arlington would, theoretically at least, make right what has been an historical wrong. The problem is that real estate is no longer affordable here in Arlington and the duplex condos that would replace single-family homes would not be affordable to middle class folks, let alone to marginalized, lower-income people. Eliminating single-family zoning at this point in history would fuel the destruction of our existing single-family houses only to replace them (as we have seen in the R2 zones) with high-priced, large-footprint condos selling in the vicinity of \$1M.

Finally, I just want to say that I support truly affordable housing in Arlington and voted to create the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and the creation of a Real Estate Transfer fee to fund it. I voted in favor of a failed bid to have the majority of those funds help Arlington residents earning at or less than 60% of the so-called AMI, Area Median Income. Instead, the Fund continues to be targeted to those earning 100% AMI. I voted in support of a failed zoning amendment that would have increased the percentage of affordable housing units required in any development subject to Section 8.2 of the Zoning Bylaw. And finally, if it were ever reintroduced, I would welcome the return of rent control to Massachusetts as a way to protect the vulnerable from eviction and homelessness as it once did before the State legislature outlawed it.

I will be voting against Article 38 and any amendments put before Town Meeting. I hope you join me in this vote.

Sincerely,
Jordan Weinstein
Town Meeting Member, pct. 21